



## DARK DAYS.

"I managed all right, sir," said William, "I know deep on the road."

"Not so deep as I fancied 'twould be. All drifted and blown up to one side, like. I never seen such a thing. Drift must have been feet deep this morning. What must it be now, I wonder? Something like the Arctic regions, I should think, sir!"

For the first time for hours and hours a ray of hope flashed across me. William had walked that lonely road this morning, and noticed nothing except the drifted snow! I remembered how I placed the dead man in the little hollow at the bottom of the bank. Could it be that the kindly, merciful snow, which I have already described as beginning to form in a winding-shoot, had hidden and buried him? That a pure white, shapeless heap, which told no tales, concealed for a while the dark dead from the world! Oh that Philippa were well enough to leave this place to-morrow! We might fly and leave no trace behind us. She might never know what she had done in her madness. The fearful secret would be mine alone. A burden it would be, but one which I might easily find strength enough to bear. Bear it! I could bear it, and be happy; for something told me that, could I but save her from the peril which menaced her, Philippa and I would part no more in this world until death, the only conqueror of such love as mine, swept us asunder.

Once more I looked out into the night. Still the snow-flakes whirled down. Oh, brave, kind snow! Fall, fall, fall! Hide the masses on the dead wretch. Hide him deep in your bosom. Fall for weeks, for months, forever! Save my love and me!

### CHAPTER VI.

#### THE SECRET KEPT.

It is needless to say that when I awoke the next morning my first thought was of Philippa; but my first action was to go to my window and look at the skies. My heart sank within me as I saw that the snow had ceased falling, and the wintry sun was shining. I threw up the sash; the cold air cut me like a knife. I gathered up a handful of snow from the window-sill. It crumbled in my fingers like tooth-powder. I guessed at once that a hard black frost had succeeded the snow. I ran down stairs and glanced at my thermometer outside my sitting-room window. It registered twelve degrees of frost. My spirits rose; I felt that Philippa would be saved. The wind was due east; so long as it stayed there the frost would last, and that white tomb on the roadside hide the secret of the dreadful night.

I found, moreover, that Philippa's condition was all that could, under the circumstances, be hoped for. Since she had awakened from that long sleep into which the opiate had plunged her, there had been no recurrence of the delusions; no symptoms which gave me any alarm. She was, of course, weak in body, but quite quiet and collected. She spoke but little, and the few words which she did speak had no bearing on forbidding or disturbing subjects.

Day after day went by, and still the brave black frost held the world in its iron grip, and kept the secret of the night. Morning after morning I woke to find the wind still blowing from the east, the skies clear and showing every evidence of a long spell of hard weather. A presentiment that we should be saved was now firmly established in my mind. The heavens themselves seemed to be shielding us and working for us.

I have not given the year in which these things occurred; but many who can remember that mighty fall of snow, and the time which the frost kept it on the earth, will be able to fix the date. Since that year there has been no weather like it.

Day after day grew better, an I stronger. I spare you, as I promised to, all description which is not absolutely necessary of my treatment of my patient, and all technical summary of the case; but before many days had gone by I knew that, as I hoped, I had to deal with one of those rare instances in which the balance of the mind is restored by forced sleep, and the complete restoration of health is but a matter of time and care.

As soon as it became a certainty that all danger to life or reason was at an end, I began to consider what course to adopt. The moment she was well enough to risk the journey, or even, if a thaw set in, before then, Philippa must fly from the rear of the tragedy in which she had played so terribly, yet morally irresponsible, part. We must put land and seas between ourselves and the fatal spot. But how to persuade her that such a flight was absolutely necessary? Brother and sister as we now termed ourselves, would she ever consent to accompany me abroad? Had I the right to put the woman I loved in such an equivocal position? No! a thousand times no! And yet I knew there was no safety for her in England; and with whom could she leave England save with me?

I dared not urge upon her my true reason for flight. It was my greatest hope that the events of that night had left her mind when the madness left her, never to be recalled. And now time was pressing; ten days had passed by. The glorious frost still kept our counsel, but it could not last forever. The time must come when the white heaps of snow would melt and vanish away, and then Sir Mervyn Ferrand's cold dead face would appear, and tell the tale of his death to the first passer-by.

I had scarcely quitted the house since that night. Yet one day a kind of morbid fascination had led me to walk along the road toward Edding, and to halt at what I judged to be the spot where I laid the dead man by the side of the road. I fancied I could single out the very drift under which that awful thing lay, and a dreary temptation to probe the white heap with my stick, and make sure, assailed me. I resisted it, and turned away from the spot.

There was a certain amount of traffic on the road. By now the snow had been beaten down by cart wheels and people's feet, so that it was quite possible to walk from one place to another. As I reached the house from which Philippa fled to seek refuge with me, I encountered Mrs. Wilson. I was going to pass without any sign of recognition, but she stopped me.

"I thought you were going to take your sister away?" she said.

"Lady Ferrand was unfortunately taken very ill when she left you. She is now hardly well enough to be removed."

"Has she been heard from Sir Mervyn?" asked Mrs. Wilson, abruptly.

"Not to my knowledge," I replied.

"It is strange. You know, I suppose, that he was expected at my house that night?"

"Certainly I do. It was for that reason my sister left you."

Mrs. Wilson looked at me thoughtfully. "She will not meet him again!"

"Never," I said, thinking as I spoke that my words bore a meaning only known to myself.

"Does she hate him?" she asked, suddenly.

"She has been cruelly wronged," I said, easily.

She laid her hand on my arm. "Listen," she said. "If I thought she hated him I would see her before she leaves, and tell her something. If I thought he hated her I would tell him. I will wait and see."

She turned away and walked on, leaving me to make the best of her enigmatical words. She was evidently a strange woman, and I felt more sure than ever we were in some way mixed up with Sir Mervyn Ferrand's early life. I had a great mind to follow her, but

demanded an explanation, but caution told me that the less I said to her the better. It was from this woman's knowledge of the relationship between Philippa and the dead man that, when the secret of the night was laid bare, the greatest danger must arise.

After a long silence Philippa spoke. "Tell me, Basil, have you heard from that man?"

I shook my head.

"Where is he? He was coming that night. Did he come?"

"I suppose not. Why do you ask?"

"Basil, a kind of horrible dream haunts me. There was something I dreamed of that fearful night, something I dream of now. Tell me what it was."

The perspiration rose to my brow. "Dearest," I said, "no wonder you dream. You are well now, but that night you were quite out of your senses. Your fancies are but the remains of that delirium. Think no more of that wretch; he is probably living in Paris, after the manner of his kind. Think only that life is going to be calm and accomplished fact."

Antony to keep the knowledge of her fatal act from her! I forced myself to talk in a light, cheerful manner. I jested at the appearance of the few muffled-up country people whom we passed on the road. I pointed out the beauty of the trees on the wayside, each branch of which bore foliage of glistening snow. "Did all I could to turn her thoughts into other channels—to drive that strange questioning look from her eyes. Right glad I felt when we were at last in the train, and the first stage of our flight an accomplished fact.

Upon reaching London I drove straight to the hotel at which my mother was staying. It was one of those high-priced respectable private hotels in Jermyn street. I engaged rooms for my sister and myself. I sent Philippa to her room to rest, and then went to find my mother. In another minute I was in her arms, and she half an hour was over I had told her Philippa's story, and my love for the woman on whose behalf I besought her protection.

Yes, I had done right to trust her. I knew her noble nature; her utter freedom from the petty trammels of society. I knew the love she bore her son. Let me here thank her once more for what she did for me that day.

She heard all my outpourings in silence. I told her all, save two things: the name of the man who had wronged my love and the fate which had overtaken him. I told her as I have told you, how I had loved—how I loved Philippa; how I now dared to hope that in time to come my love would be rewarded. I prayed her to take my papa's gift to her heart, and by treating her as a daughter restore, if it were possible, her respect.

My mother heard me. Her sweet face grew a shade paler. Her lips quivered, and the tears stood in her eyes. I knew all that was passing through her mind. I knew how proud she was of me, and what great thing she had hoped I should do in the world. She was a woman, and, woman-like, I counted upon her son's bettering himself by marriage; but, in spite of all this, I knew I was right in counting upon her aid. Once again, my sweet mother, I thank you.

She rose. "Let me see the woman you love. Where is she? I will go to her."

"She is here in this house. Ah, mother, I know you would do this for me."

She kissed my forehead. "Bring her to me," she said.

I went out, and sent word to Philippa. She had removed the stains of travel, and, although pale, looked the perfection of graceful beauty. I led her to my mother's room. She stopped short as she saw it tenanted by a lady. A quick blush crossed her cheek.

"Philippa, dearest," I said, "this is my mother. I have told her all, and she is waiting to welcome you."

Still she stood motionless, save that her head bent down and her form heaved. My mother came to her side, and, placing her kind arms around her, whispered some words which I neither heard nor tried to hear. Philippa broke into a storm of sobs, and for some moments wailed on my mother's shoulder.

Then she raised her head and looked at me, and my heart leaped at the expression in her tearful eyes. "Basil, my brother, you are too good to me!" she ejaculated.

My mother led her to the sofa, and, with her arms still round her, sat down by her side. I left them, knowing that my love had now the trust, noblest heart to sol against; the quickest, most sympathetic ear to listen to the tale of her wrongs; and the softest, kindest voice to soothe and console her.

Ah! how happy I should have felt could that one night's dark work have been undone—could that white tomb forever hold its ghastly secret!

"Out of the whirling snow," I said as lightly as I could. "You came in a high state of fever and delirium."

"Where had I been? What had I been doing?"

"You came straight from Mrs. Wilson's, I suppose. I know no more."

Then she sighed and turned her head away; but I soon found her troubled dark eyes again fixed on my own. I could do nothing but meet their gaze bravely, and pray that my poor love might never, never be able to fill those hours which were at present a blank to her.

At last, exactly a fortnight from the fatal day, we left my home. I was now what is legally termed an accessory after the fact, and was making every effort to save the poor girl from justice. In order to avert suspicion, I decided it was better not to shut up my love, so I left the faithful William to take care of it, and await my instructions. At present it was advisable that any inquirers should learn that I had gone to London with my sister, and that the time of our return was uncertain. By and by, if all went well, I could get rid of my cot tags in an ordinary way. I place, for one, should never wish to visit the place again.

Philippa acquiesced in all my arrangements. She was quite willing to accompany me to town. She trusted me with childlike simplicity. "Basil, Basil, afterward—what afterward?" she asked.

Even in the midst of the menacing peril it was all I could do to refrain from kneeling at her feet and telling her that my love would solve the question of the future.

I have a surprise for you in London," I said, as cheerfully as I could. "You came in a high state of fever and delirium."

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